

Magna Carta

King John, king of England from 1199 – 1216, was a mean-spirited man who raised taxes to an all-time high to finance his wars. His nobles revolted and in 1215, they forced King John to agree to a most celebrated document in English history, the **Magna Carta** (Great Charter). This document guaranteed certain basic political rights, and in so doing, limited the king's powers! Some of these rights included no taxation without representation, a jury trial, and the protection of the law. Even though originally the Magna Carta applied only to the nobles, in later years the English people of all classes argued that certain clauses in the Magna Carta applied to every citizen. The Magna Carta guaranteed what are now considered basic legal rights both in England and in the U.S.

Glorious Revolution

In 1688, King James II was overthrown in what is called a “Glorious Revolution” after members of Parliament invited William and Mary to take over the throne to guarantee Protestantism in Great Britain. (This is also referred to as the “Bloodless Revolution”). At their coronation, William and Mary vowed to “govern the people of this kingdom of England.....according to the statutes in Parliament agreed on and the laws and customs of the same.” In other words, William and Mary recognized Parliament as their **partner** in governing England, making England **not an absolute monarchy but a constitutional monarchy**, where laws limited the ruler's power.

English Bill of Rights

After the Glorious Revolution, to make clear the limits of royal power, Parliament drafted a **Bill of Rights** in 1689 and William and Mary officially consented to these and other limits on their royal power. This document listed many things that a ruler could not do:

- No suspending of Parliament's laws
- No levying of taxes without a specific grant from Parliament
- No interfering with freedom of speech in Parliament
- No penalty for a citizen who petitions the king about grievances

This law is the first attempt to outline the basic rights to which all citizens were entitled.

Mayflower Compact

In 1620, about 100 Pilgrims sailed to New England on the *Mayflower* in hopes of making a new home in North America where they would be free to worship as they wanted. Concerned that some members might leave to form their own colonies, William Bradford and others drafted the compact (agreement) to form a political body and the members pledged (promised) to abide by (follow) any laws that would be established. This document kept the Pilgrims together and showed that **they expected to decide for themselves how they would be governed**. Later, this belief in self-government would become one of the founding principles of the United States.

House of Burgesses

Where did the idea of “representative government” in the new colonies come from? Virginia, a royal colony, is appointed a royal governor to run the colony. But more importantly, a legislative body, or **lawmaking assembly**, is also created. And these representatives become known as the **House of Burgesses**. This is the first instance of limited self-government in the English.

Albany Plan of Union

Beginning in the late 1600's, Britain and France were often at war. The last of the conflicts, the French and Indian War, started in the colonies and spread to Europe. Benjamin Franklin, in 1754, proposed a plan which called for the 13 British colonies to unite in a military union to combat Indian hostilities. But also, he had a greater vision. Just as the Iroquois nation had strengthened itself by forming the Iroquois League, Franklin also thought the British colonies would benefit from greater unity. The plan called for each colony to send representatives to a new council which would appoint a president – general. The council would have the power to make war, raise arms, build forts and levy taxes. **Although the plan was eventually rejected, it represented the first attempt to unite the 13 colonies into a union.**

Declaration of Independence

July 4, 1776

This document, approved by the Continental Congress, announced the separation of 13 North American British colonies from Britain. The armed conflict during the American Revolution gradually convinced the colonists that separation from Britain was essential. Thomas Jefferson was persuaded to write the draft which was presented on June 28 with few changes. The document began with a *declaration on individual rights*, and then listed the *acts of tyranny* (abuse) by George III that was the *justification for independence*. After debate and some changes (for example, a condemnation of slavery was deleted), the declaration was approved on July 4, 1776 as “The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America.” Congress’ president, John Hancock, printed and read it aloud to a crowd assembled outside, then engrossed (written in script) on parchment, and signed by the 56 delegates.

Articles of Confederation

This was the early U.S. Constitution (1781-1789) that bridged the initial government by the First Continental Congress and the federal government provided under the U.S. Constitution of the 1787.

The A of C provided for a **confederation** (loose association) of sovereign states (independent of all others) and gave Congress power to:

- regulate foreign affairs
- regulate war
- regulate the postal service
- control Indian affairs
- borrow money